Physical and Psychological Safety Promotes Youth Learning in 4-H

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Introduction

Recent research indicates that specific features influence positive developmental processes in youth. When adults provide experiences with such features they promote developmental assets. 4-H programs rely upon two factors to function successfully at the community level. These are youth who participate and adults who support their participation and lead their activities. Very little research has been conducted, however, to determine how community programs, such as 4-H, fit into this model of positive youth development.

In 2003, a statewide assessment was conducted to measure the impact of 4-H programs in Nevada. Part of our assessment goal was to study the extent to which Nevada 4-H promotes positive youth development in community settings as seen through the eyes of the parents and adult leader involved in 4-H.

Assessment Methods

Participants in the 2003 assessment included adult volunteer leaders and parents of all currently enrolled 4-H members in Nevada. Participants were selected based partly on the rationale that 4-H leaders and parents have the most frequent opportunity to observe any changes that occur among 4-H youth. Volunteer leaders, in particular, provide the instruction and guidance for 4-H youth through program activities and events.

Approximately 3,000 individuals received a one-page questionnaire (front-back) with instructions, and a self-addressed, stamped return envelope. Also included was a cover letter that explained the purpose of the survey, ensuring confidentiality of participants and thanking them for their participation.

Volunteer 4-H Leader Skills

A set of questions were developed to measure adults’ skill levels to work with 4-H youth. The survey also measured how well volunteer 4-H leaders are trained to work with youth. Since each county in Nevada develops, implements and evaluates leader trainings individually, this impact measure seems especially informative as an impact measure.
Additionally, these questions represent a much larger set of items that serve as critical indicators of quality youth development programs as determined by the National Academies Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth. Table 1 illustrates 7 critical indicators of quality youth development and associated skill sets for adults.

### Table 1. Critical Indicators of Quality Youth Development and Associated Skill Sets

1. **Physical and Psychological Safety:**
   - keeping youth from hurting each others feelings
   - keeping youth from bullying each other
   - managing conflict between youth
   - making sure that the facility where we have 4-H is safe

2. **Appropriate Structure:**
   - making sure youth are occupied during 4-H meetings & activities
   - providing youth with age-appropriate learning activities

3. **Supportive Relationships:**
   - listening to youth
   - understanding a “youth” point of view
   - relating well to youth from different cultures/backgrounds
   - making sure I'm easy to approach if a youth has a problem

4. **Opportunities to Belong:**
   - helping youth to feel like they belong to a part of a special group
   - helping youth to feel they are an important part of the 4-H program

5. **Positive Social Norms**
   - letting youth know I have high expectations of them
   - ensuring that youth act appropriately in the 4-H program

6. **Opportunities for Skill Building:**
   - providing activities that are designed to help youth learn life skills such as healthy lifestyles, goal setting and decision making
   - providing activities designed to help youth learn social skills such as communication and relationship building

7. **Support for Efficacy and Mattering:**
   - encouraging youth to take on leadership roles
   - conducting activities with youth that are challenging to them

**Life Skills Learned Through 4-H Involvement**

In addition to adult skills, a set of questions were developed to measure life skills 4-H youth learn through their participation in the 4-H program. These questions were based on related aspects of a youth development model that identifies six outcomes of successful youth development: confidence, competence, caring, connection, contributing and character. Survey items also incorporated Nevada’s “core concepts” for teaching life skills. The core concepts provide a basis for successful statewide youth development programs. Such programs produce youth who:

- learn and practice *self-responsibility and social responsibility* to feel accountable and in control of their lives;
- recognize when and how to make informed decisions and implement decisions to solve a problem or achieve goals;
- communicate effectively in both verbal and written form, to share thoughts and feelings which increase social competence, and;
- acquire career and occupational information to help prepare for the world of work.

Combining aspects of both models resulted in fifteen questions to assess the impacts of 4-H in teaching life skills to youth. Specifically, these life skills are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dealing with conflicts</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Future career choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship-building</td>
<td>Self-responsibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>Trust others and be trustworthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Knowledge about particular 4-H project(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Decision-making</td>
<td>Goal setting</td>
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<td>Self-confidence around others</td>
<td>Community service</td>
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<td>Public-speaking</td>
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**Results of the Assessment**

Of the total (3,071) parents and volunteers in Nevada who were mailed surveys, 576 returned completed questionnaires resulting in a 19 percent response rate. A regression analysis was conducted to measure the influence of 4-H leader skills specifically on the life skills 4-Hers learn through 4-H participation.\(^1\) Results indicate that the most important skill a volunteer 4-H leader possesses that influences the skills learned by youth is ensuring the physical and psychological safety of the 4-H members. Physical and psychological safety specifically is defined as:

- Keeping youth from hurting each other’s feelings.
- Keeping youth from bullying each other.
- Managing conflict between youth.
- Making sure that the facility where we have 4-H is safe.

A secondary influence, based on volunteer leader perceptions includes:

- Encouraging youth to take on leadership roles
- Conducting activities with youth that are challenging to them.

**Conclusions**

An analysis of the influence of volunteer 4-H leader skills on the life skills 4-Hers learn, reveals that a key leader skill is providing for the physical and psychological safety of 4-H youth. A secondary leader skill is to challenge and engage 4-H youth through 4-H programs and activities.

These results underscore the need to continue careful recruitment and rigorous screening of volunteers to lead Nevada’s 4-H programs. Currently, Nevada’s recruitment and screening process statewide requires volunteers be fingerprinted in order to conduct criminal background checks for

\(^1\) Stepwise unrelated regression (SUR) analysis; adjusted R\(^2\) (.19). Readers may contact the authors to acquire a detailed report of the regression results, including description of independent and dependent variables used and resulting beta coefficients.
child-related offenses. This process also requires volunteers be trained in child abuse and neglect recognition. The volunteer application and references are reviewed to ensure that the volunteer meets the requirements of Nevada 4-H to work with youth.

Since leader training in Nevada is developed and implemented at the county level, other features of leader training programs that affect recruitment, screening and leader retention vary statewide and are not well known. For example, while some county training programs teach leaders to be sensitive to cognitive developmental stages while other counties do not include this as part of their training. Few counties in Nevada have included the key social support aspects of youth development including strategies to deal with conflict, bullying, and hurt feelings.

After volunteers are approved to work with Nevada 4-H members, attention to and rewarding of positive, productive behaviors of adult 4-H leaders is crucial. Currently, volunteers sign a Code of Conduct. Violators of that policy may be disciplined. This and other steps have been implemented in the Nevada 4-H program in support of the key leader skill related to providing for the physical and psychological safety of 4-H youth. The research described here indicates that these measures are imperative underlying factors that directly relate to how much youth in the program learn. In fact, this research indicates these are among the most important determinants to youth knowledge gains.

Efforts are underway to share these and other results of the statewide assessment with Extension professionals and county 4-H staff through regional trainings. Any changes contemplated for the 4-H program as a result of current findings must be discussed thoroughly, involving administrators, Extension Educators and 4-H staff statewide and at the county level. The results of such a process can help provide a framework to strengthen Nevada 4-H.

References

